

# **The Santa Chronicles**

Sermon Delivered by  
**Rev. Len De Roche**

There is little doubt that in our country, and possibly all of western culture, holds Christmas as our primary religious festival of the year. I believe its main prophet and god is Santa Claus. The marketing of the holiday in most of our stores and in advertisements both in print and the small screen has a Santa Claus theme as the most prominent of those images which represents the holiday Christmas. Like our Roman and Greek ancestors where each holiday honors a God, so I feel, has been the evolution of Santa into that role. There has been an evolution that has produced this since neither the observance of Christmas nor the personification of the mythical man in the red suit bear much direct correlation to either the celebration of the birth of the Jesus or the Roman celebration of Saturnalia, but there are some loose connections.

The choice of the date that we honor as Christmas became the honored date in 336 CE when a Christian Rome chose December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth. This is a standard process for honoring birthdates. In most monarchies there is an official birth date which bears no correlation to the actual date. In Constantine's Rome when the government was working out Christianity by picking the official books and practices that became the Christian religion, they discovered that they really knew little about the birth of Jesus. We know now that the gospel versions were a cultural attempt to give a leader a birth that is extraordinary. Even some Roman emperors were given supernatural births after they became ruler to give them more authority in life. So with the birth of Jesus.

Simultaneously, the celebration of Saturnalia was the Roman feast honoring the goddess of agriculture was being practiced despite the declaration of the official religion being Christianity. The feast of Saturnalia's placement in the calendar corresponds with the completion of the winter seed sowing and before the blessings of the fields. The festival included periods of rest and merry making, connections with family and friends, and included prayers for the protection of the crops. The festival was celebrated with candles and fire, greens like holly formed wreaths and garlands which decorated the homes. Under Roman law, punishment and war making were suspended during the festival. Fruits representing increase and dolls were given as gifts. There was also the custom of Charity for the less fortunate with gifts of food.

Part of the Christian birth narrative contained stories of the Magi or wise men who traveled to honor the birth. In the story, they honor the divine child with tribute as in the time any dignitary would honor any ruler.

This is common to most birth narratives which were developed to build the statue of some god or ruler. This tradition is as a show of respect through tribute and follows many births of future kings in many cultures. The Magi's gifts would emphasize the royal authority of the birth, but the gift motif which follows in our culture for the gift of a child not as tribute helps the evolution of Santa.

Like with any religion, the religion of Santa Claus comes with its mythology. The historical Saint Nicholas comes from the orthodox Christianity in the east. He became a monk in about 342 CE and eventually an Archbishop. This date correlates with the development of Christmas in the Western branch of the Church. His characteristics for sainthood were his charities to the poor. Theologically, Nicholas was an opponent of Arianism, an early heresy of Unitarianism. He was honored with a church in Constantinople built by the Emperor Justinian.

The Russian Orthodox Church probably brings in the idea of snow, reindeer and sleighs and holds Saint Nicholas as the founding saint. Early church legends make him an advocate for children and sailors. In one of these early legends Nicholas delivered a bag of gold coins to the poor by tossing it through a window. As his legend spread through Europe he became a bearer of gifts. These stories meshed with the pagan figures in Romans and German mythology and the practice of Saturnalia. As a saint in Germany he is called Sankt Nikolaus, in Holland as Sinter Klaas. Both originated as pagan figures who rode through the sky on horses. His depiction in German and Dutch culture had him wearing the robes of a bishop. In fact, one story has the Klass figure dressed like the Spanish Inquisition Bishops who had a large presence in Holland. In early drawings the Klass figure is accompanied by an elf character named Black Peter. His job in the stories was to whip the unruly and naughty children and then put them in a bag. The Dutch never did comment on the loss of children to the bag.

As the reformation came to Germany in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the new Protestant church calendar emphasized the date of the birth of the Christ on the 25<sup>th</sup> while downplaying St. Nicholas Day, December 6<sup>th</sup>. The Christ Child or Christkindl evolved linguistically into Kriss Kringle.

Meanwhile, the Reformed movement of Protestantism that became known as Puritanism of England and New England rejected Christmas

celebrations as a major holiday. In Massachusetts in 1621, one year after landing, Governor Bradford discovered that some of the colony's new residents were planning to take Christmas day off and ordered them back to work. Again in 1659 the General Court of Massachusetts declared that to celebrate Christmas was a criminal offence and until 1681 the criminal was subject to a fine of five shillings. Similar thinking occurred under the puritan governments of England.

In Puritan thinking, the celebration of Christ's birth was not a biblical event in December but was an arbitrary Catholic decision, which, of course, it was. Their reformed theology emphasized going back to the bible for authority. The Puritans objected to the medieval partying practices called reveling that had grown up around the holiday both in England and on the continent. December had become a month for natural overindulging; all of the harvesting was complete, the stock that was not being kept over the winter had been slaughtered and much needed to be eaten due to lack of preservation options and the wines and beers brewed in the summer and fall were just starting to come into season. It was these traditions that our Pilgrim forbears rejected in what we imagine as traditional puritan practice. In fact, I believe there was no real joy in Massachusetts until the Irish arrived.

Meanwhile, further south in New York, Santa Claus was developing in the Dutch colony. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century the Dutch brought the legend of Sinter Klass and he became altered in print as St. A. Claus. But the real propagation of Santa Claus began with the popular writers of New York. Washington Irving detailed the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas. In 1809 under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving published the *"History of New York"*. Here he described a thin Santa Claus and his elf Black Peter on horseback. This image was popularized and developed into the saintly Nick by Clement Clark Moore in his 1823 poem *"the night before Christmas."* As a composite image of Dutch and Russian illustrations Moore's image became the American Santa with reindeer, and jollity and his elf like ability to enter homes via chimneys ***with the little old driver and his miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer.*** Moore develops Santa Claus as an elf-like being who brings joy especially to children.

In Moore's contribution to Santa was also a development that helped social justice affecting child labor.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century children were looked at as small adults but in Moore's famous poem we see a more important view of childhood, an picture of imagination and wonder. Thomas Nast, a New York Unitarian who was an illustrator further spread Moore's Claus image in Harpers and the New Yorker magazine from 1860-1880. He added the

idea of Santa's workshop and increased Santa to human-size from the elf like creation of Moore's poem. The popularizing of this image was finalized by the advertising images by Montgomery Ward, Sears and Coca-Cola illustrators.

Along with his image our culture was developing Santa's theology. Santa Claus is a discriminating deity. He is an all-knowing party who knows who is naughty and nice. This follows from the idea of Black Peter. The image is very masculine and male, but not particularly sexual. This image takes from Michelangelo's idea of an old white-haired, white bearded patriarch from the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. And as many other religions promise rewards based on the works we perform throughout the year, so does the religion of Santa Claus. The Theologian calls this a works theology. There is almost the idea of entering of a years accounting in a book as it is in the practice of Yom Kipper. There is the idea of a negative reward of coal in stockings for those who haven't measured up well. In another poem of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century we hear the judgment expressed for the future.

“Then holy St. Nicholas! all the year,  
Our Books we will love and our parent revere,  
From Naughty behavior we'll always refrain,  
In hopes that you'll reward us again.”

This is the theology of authority and judgment that culminated in the yearly Day of Judgment as seen in the rewards under the Christmas trees of America.

This is in keeping with the Dutch concept of rewards and punishment that is seen depicted in art going back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As one Christmas tune notes “you'd better watch out... Santa Claus is coming to town...he knows if you've been bad or good-so be good for goodness sake.” These ideas are meant for children and have the judgment as a yearly event with the ability of wipe the slate free each year when punishment and reward are meted out. This theology teaches the preparation of the idea of adult judgment, which is a lifetime judgment. It has further ramifications especially when thinking of economic successes and may well come out of the New York City ethic of hard work and success being seen in the balance sheet. For those who are not economically able to reward their children, there is a personal judgment. This deity of Christmas recognizes the inherent worth of wealth and non-worth of poverty. This was essential to the Victorian idea of wealth.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was thought that success in commerce was a divine gift for the successful person. If we look at the era of the

Vanderbilts, Rockefellers and Carnegies and what became the social gospel of the era. The theology of the wealth was god given and poverty was likewise ordained. These thoughts may well come out of the reformed theology of predestinated events. Charity became the reward of the rich for being blessed to care for those who were not as blessed. This theology certainly places the deity of the Claus as favoring those who have succeeded in commerce and punishes those whose successes are limited. The theological landscapes of today's Washington may be similar in the relationship of the poor and the view of the poor is seen in the erosion of the social services by federal funding and programs.

The theology of Santa revolves around money. It perpetrates the theology of reward for those with money and guilt for those not as successful. This Theology of the deity of Santa Claus has affected the growth of Hanukkah into a gift giving enterprise. These are the shadow sides of the Santa theology, but there is much that the spirit of Santa Claus nurtures.

Jesse Jackson once said, "Your children need your presence more than your presents." The religion of Santa Claus encourages family oriented celebration. This part of this religion mirrors the other major religions which celebrate in the mid-winter: Ramadan, Hanukkah, the Hindu celebration of light and the Birth of Jesus.

Another very significant dogma of the religion of Santa is the public nature of charity during this season. At most malls which emphasis Christmas purchased we find the bell-ringing Salvation Army Santas with their kettles for donations.

During this season Santa's religion of charitable giving is consistent with all the major religions. The use of Santa's example to advertise charity produces much money for the non-profit agencies that produce good in our world. This theology is consistent with the year ending and the excess profits or crops would be contributed to the less fortunate. These theological statements relate to the Victorian idea of the divine blessing being shared when that blessing is seen as a vindication of a certain divine blessing that are received by the elect but are not granted to those who the divine does not bless. What this theology does not imply is that the underprivileged are entitled to a share of success from public coffers. This is a shadow side of these charitable gifts that is part of the dogma of the religion of Santa.

Our Western culture, I believe, has evolved a Santa Claus whose religion has profound effects on our way of being. May we each find our own Santas in this season.

In an ever-involving and never-ending world. Amen